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3 Bay of Pigs Insiders Agree on Basic Flaws

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Three of the men most intimately informed about the Bay of Pigs invasion—the worst defeat of John F. Kennedy's career—have chosen this week to reveal their recollections of the disaster and their reactions to it.

They agree to a remarkable degree on what happened—and even on why it all went wrong.

In what many undoubtedly will regard as the most startling revelation of all, Kennedy's closest adviser, Theodore C. Sorensen, writes in the current issue of Look magazine that "I am limited by the fact that I knew nothing of the operation until after it was over."

Nevertheless, Sorenson reports in detail on conversations he had with Kennedy in the days immediately after the disaster and his account probably comes as close as historians will ever come to knowing what went through the mind of the late President in those dark days of mid-April, 1964.

The week's first account of the invasion by 1,400 Cuban exiles, which began on April 17 and ended when they ran out of ammunition two days later, came Monday in a Life magazine article by historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., who was also a close adviser to the President.

On Tuesday, Richard M. Bissell Jr., who planned the operation for the Central Intelligence Agency, said in a Washington Star interview that, if he had it to do over again, he might urge the United States to recognize a Cuban government in exile and supply it openly with money and "volunteer" fighting men.

2 Writing Books

All three men are now out of the government. Bissell is an executive of United Aircraft Corp. in Hartford, Conn. Sorenson and Schlesinger are writing books from which the two accounts published this week are excerpted.

Sorenson, Bissell and Schlesinger all agree that the operation had been weakened by both foreign and domestic political considerations so that it was, in Sorenson's words, "too large to be clandestine and too small to be successful."

"Unfortunately," Sorenson writes, "among those privy to the plan in both the State Department and the White House, doubts were entertained but never pressed. . . . The CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the other hand, had doubts about whether the plan had been fatally weakened by those very curbs, but did not press them."

In the interview published in The Star, Bissell put it this way:

"We can be criticized for allowing this chipping away to go on without insisting on the whole plan or on cancellation. Because we were so involved in seeing it go ahead, we did not insist on as great freedom of action as we needed."

Deadline Cited

Although now it would appear that, as doubts grew on both sides, it might have been better to postpone the action and review the entire plan, everyone involved was working under what they thought was a severe deadline.

Within a short time, they believed, Soviet planes and other arms would be delivered to Cuba that would doom anything short of a full-scale U.S. invasion.

"The President," Sorenson says, "thought he was approving a plan rushed into execution on the grounds that Castro would later acquire the military capability to defeat it. Castro, in fact, already possessed that capability."

As it turned out, Castro did defeat the small invasion force. But Bissell still feels that the chances for success would have been improved substantially if the second air strike, which was cancelled by the President, had been carried out as scheduled in an effort to complete the destruction of Castro's tiny, obsolete air force.

Most dramatically revealed in the three accounts of the operation is the evidence of a critical collapse of communications.

Both Sorenson and Schlesinger feel that the CIA and the Pentagon believed — perhaps subconsciously — that once the operation was under way the United States would not let it fail. Schlesinger leans to the assumption that this was subconscious. But Sorenson says:

"Their planning, it turned out, proceeded almost as if open intervention by the United States were assumed, but their answers to the President's specific questions did not."

But there should have been no doubt on this issue.

President's Stand

Five days before the invasion began and three days before the first air strike, the President publicly stated that "there will not be, under any conditions, any intervention in Cuba by United States armed forces."

Bissell says the CIA got the message, tried as clearly as possible to pass it on to the exile brigade and did not, in fact, expect that U.S. troops would become involved except possibly in the enforcement of a negotiated cease-fire.

But interviews by Haynes Johnson a Star reporter and author of the book, "The Bay of Pigs," indicated clearly that many of the invaders expected that their effort would not be permitted to fail.

Perhaps the most serious breakdown in communications was due to the newness of the Kennedy administration.

Schlesinger and Sorenson both indicate that the intricate decision-making machinery that functioned so brilliantly in October, 1962, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis, was nonexistent at the time of the Bay of Pigs.

It was only after the disaster, Sorenson says, that Kennedy told Sorenson to involve himself more in problems of foreign policy.

At the time, Sorenson says, Kennedy did not even have a staff intelligence officer at the White House to help him evaluate the advice of the experts.

Candid Paragraphs

Sorenson, in a series of paragraphs that candidly—and even harshly—list Kennedy's own failures, writes:

"He should never have believed that it would be arrogant and presumptious of him, newly arrived on the scene, to call off the plans of the renowned experts and the brave exiles."

On Thursday of the week of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy and Sorenson walked in the White House grounds and Kennedy reportedly asked himself aloud:

"How could I have been so far off base? All my life I've known better than to depend on the experts. How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"

Sorenson says Schlesinger and Sen. J. William Fulbright, D.-Ark., among others, had voiced

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